


The Seven of Sustainable



Principles Leadership

Education leaders want to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a lasting legacy.

Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink



A charismatic principal turns around an underperforming school—then sees all his work unravel within months of his subsequent promotion to the central office. The principal of a magnet school boosts her institution's reputation by attracting top students from across the city; meanwhile, the neighborhood school's test scores plummet as the magnet school steals its best students. Teachers in a high school watch four principals pass through their school in six years and conclude that they can easily wait out all future principals and their change agendas.

These examples of unsustainable leadership emerged in a Spencer Foundation-funded study of change during three decades in eight U.S. and Canadian high schools, as seen through the eyes of more than 200 teachers and administrators (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004). The study found that a key force leading to meaningful, long-term change is leadership sustainability.

Most school leadership practices create temporary, localized flurries of change but little lasting or widespread improvement. The study found some exceptions, however. From the first day of their appointment, some leaders thought hard about how they might implement deep, broad, and long-lasting reforms.

The following examples from our study illustrate seven principles that together define sustainable leadership.¹

Sustainable Leadership Matters

The prime responsibility of all education leaders is to put in place learning that engages students intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Sustainable leadership goes beyond temporary gains in achievement scores to create lasting, meaningful improvements in learning (Glickman, 2002; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2002). Two examples illustrate this point.

Talisman Park High School's principal reacted to a newly mandated 10th grade literacy test—which students would have to pass to graduate—by trying to shield his experienced staff from time-consuming test-related activities. He decided that the most expedient way to get good results was to concentrate on boosting the achievement of students who were likely to fall just below the passing grade. Although the strategy made the school's immediate scores look good, other students who really needed help with literacy were cast by the wayside.

Meanwhile, the principal of neighboring, more ethnically diverse Wayvern High School responded to the mandated test by concentrating on improving literacy for all students in the long run. Teachers worked together to

audit and improve their literacy practices and, with the help of parents and the community, focused for an entire month on improving literacy learning for everyone. The first-year results were not dramatic. But by the second year, the school scored above the district mean, and by the third, the school had become the district's number-two performer—well ahead of privileged Talisman Park, which had opted for the quick fix.

Sustainable Leadership Lasts

Sustainable leadership means planning and preparing for succession—not as an afterthought, but from the first day of a leader's appointment. Our study offered rare glimpses of thoughtful and effective succession management. One school, for example, built on its ebullient and optimistic principal's success in forging a democratically developed school improvement plan by grooming his assistant principal to replace him when he retired.

In general, however, our study showed that leadership succession is rarely successful. Charismatic leaders are followed by less-dynamic successors who cannot maintain the momentum of improvement. Leaders who turn around underperforming schools are prematurely transferred or promoted before their improvements have had a chance to stick.

The history of Stewart Heights High School illustrates the *revolving-door principals* (MacMillan, 2000), or *carousel of leadership succession* (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, & White, 2003), that has become increasingly common in today's high-stakes, reform-driven climate. In the early 1990s, Stewart Heights had been drifting for years. Its aging staff was nostalgic for its days as a "village school" and had never accepted the challenges of its increasing urbanization and cultural diversity. The principal confessed that he did not have a particular direction or goal for the school. He just wanted to buffer his teachers from outside forces so they could concentrate on the classroom. When this principal retired, the district appointed dynamic, experi-

enced, and somewhat abrasive Bill Matthews to replace him.

Matthews believed strongly that students came first. He communicated clear expectations and a relentless determination to provide "a service to kids and the community." By the end of Matthews' third year—after the school had made curriculum changes, planned for school improvement, restructured the guidance process, and created a more-welcoming physical environment—student and parent satisfaction had increased dramatically. Suddenly, however, Matthews was

ship succession. We can achieve this goal by grooming successors to continue important reforms, by keeping successful leaders in schools longer when they are making great strides in promoting learning, by resisting the temptation to search for irreplaceable charismatic heroes to be the saviors of our schools, by requiring all district and school improvement plans to include succession plans, and by slowing down the rate of repeated successions so teachers do not cynically decide to "wait out" all their leaders (Fink & Brayman, in press).

Sustainable leadership goes beyond temporary gains in achievement scores to create lasting, meaningful improvements in learning.

promoted to a district leadership role. With leadership shortages surfacing across the district, his assistants were transferred as well.

Into the chaos that was left behind, the district parachuted first-time principal Jim West. West would have preferred to feel his way carefully, but he and his unprepared assistants had to concentrate on implementing a newly mandated reform agenda. Within months, everything Matthews had achieved in school improvement came undone. Traditional power blocs, such as the department heads' group that had dominated before Matthews' arrival, reasserted their authority because West needed their support to ensure compliance with the mandated reforms. Like a deer in the headlights, West displayed a lack of decisiveness that led some teachers to regard him and his assistants as ineffectual. As one long-serving teacher commented, "Nice people. Can't cope."

Within just three years, West was moved on. In a school that had now seen four principals in six years, the staff had become cynical.

Sustainable leadership demands that leaders pay serious attention to leader-

Sustainable Leadership Spreads

One way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure that others share and help develop their vision. Leadership succession, therefore, means more than grooming the principal's successor. It means distributing leadership throughout the school's professional community so others can carry the torch after the principal has gone (Spillane, Halverson, & Drummond, 2001).

The founding principal of Durant, an alternative high school in a northeast U.S. city, believed that the school's original vision of fostering independent learning in real-life settings would survive only if teachers, students, and parents shared that vision. The principal emphasized dialogue and shared decision making, and the staff came to believe that "we were all administrators." Long after the principal's retirement, the teachers and other members of the school community continued to resist the standardizing policies of the district and state, holding fast to their founding vision by seeking waivers for their distinctive program.

Durant's neighbor, Sheldon High School, experienced the full effects of white flight to the suburbs and to

magnet school competitors starting in the early 1980s. Sheldon saw its racial balance and intake of students with special needs shift dramatically as a result. The largely white teaching staff felt frustrated in the face of these changes and shut out of important school decisions.

As an outlet for their frustrations and leadership impulses, teachers turned increasingly to their union. As the union became more assertive, the district responded by appointing a succession of autocratic leaders—each one chosen with the idea that he could “stand up” to the union. The resulting standoff led to the school’s almost complete inability to respond effectively to its changing student population. Teachers decried lack of disciplinary support from the principal’s office and refused to change their own traditional practices.

These two scenarios show that sustainable leadership is not just the responsibility of the school administrator. In a highly complex world, no one leader, institution, or nation can control everything without help (Fullan, 2001). Sustainable leadership must be a shared responsibility.

Sustainable Leadership Is Socially Just

Sustainable leadership benefits all students and schools—not just a few at the expense of the rest. Sustainable leadership is aware of how lighthouse, magnet, and charter schools and their leaders can leave others in the shadows and is sensitive to how privileged communities can be tempted to skim the cream off the local leadership pool. Sustainable leadership recognizes and takes responsibility for the fact that schools affect one another in webs of mutual influence (Baker & Foote, in press). In this respect, sustainability is



© Steve Barrett

inextricably tied to issues of social justice.

For instance, Blue Mountain High School took great care not to raid all the best teachers, leaders, and students from nearby schools. In consultation with the school district and other high school principals, its principal operated a quota system so the school would not draw disproportionately from any one school or age group of teachers in the district. By attending to the needs of other schools, the principal not only exercised responsibility for social justice but also avoided inviting envy and resentment from neighboring schools.

By comparison, the one magnet school in our study, Barrett High School, prospered at the expense of its neighbors. The urban school was developed in the late 1980s to stem the tide of white flight out of the city by pursuing high standards and selecting appropriate students and teachers from other schools in the district. *U.S. News*

described the school as one of the top 150 high schools in the United States. Some of the school’s high-achieving students were drawn from a neighboring school. Once called the “jewel of the district,” this second school now described itself ironically as the “special education magnet”—with low attendance, high violence rates, and a standardized curriculum that robbed teachers of their social mission and professional discretion. By concentrating excellence in specialized pockets, the district created a system of high standards, authentic learning, and flexible teaching for the more-privileged magnet schools and their teachers—but allotted soulless standardization to the rest.

Sustainable leadership is therefore not only about maintaining improvement in one’s own school. Leaders who care about sustain-

ability accept responsibility for the schools and students that their own actions affect in the wider environment.

Sustainable Leadership Is Resourceful

Sustainable leadership systems provide intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best and brightest of the leadership pool. Such systems provide time and opportunity for leaders to network, learn from and support one another, and coach and mentor their successors. Sustainable leadership is thrifty without being cheap. It carefully husbands its resources in developing the talents of all its educators rather than lavishing rewards on a few proven stars. Sustainable leadership systems take care of their leaders and encourage leaders to take care of themselves.

Unfortunately, in all the schools in our study, reform demands, resource deple-

tion, and a resulting rush to retirement have created rapid turnover among principals, along with devastating reductions in the numbers of assistant principals and such middle-level leaders as department heads. In addition, school districts have dramatically downsized support from consultants, assistant superintendents, and other officials, leaving principals feeling overwhelmed and alone. Cultures of supervision and personal support for school leaders have been

of stress, she retired early.

Under this deluge of reform directives, some principals in our study hauled themselves up into district administration, escaped to the island of early retirement, were hospitalized when they drowned under the pressure, or narrowed their role from leadership to management so they could continue to cope. In the end, leadership can be sustainable only if it sustains leaders themselves.

One way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure that others share and help develop their vision.

replaced by the depersonalized demands of test-based accountability.

Teachers and school leaders who are burned out by excessive demands and diminishing resources have neither the physical energy nor the emotional capacity to develop professional learning communities (Byrne, 1994). The emotional health of leaders is a scarce resource. Unless reformers and policy-makers care for leaders' personal and professional selves, they will engineer short-term gains only by mortgaging the entire future of leadership.

Even the most motivated and committed leaders can sustain themselves for only so long. Principal Charmaine Watson had built the foundation for a collaborative learning community at Talisman Park High School, but she was suddenly transferred after three years to another school. She left grieving for the work that she still needed to do. She took the same inspirational drive and commitment to building community to her next school, but in the new context of resource reductions and unrealistic implementation timelines, the system no longer supported collaboration. So Watson was now reduced to "modeling optimism" (Blackmore, 1996). The emotional strain of trying to remain positive in depressing times eventually took its toll, and after months

Sustainable Leadership Promotes Diversity

Promoters of sustainability cultivate and re-create an environment that has the capacity to stimulate continuous improvement on a broad front. Supporters of sustainability enable people to adapt to and prosper in their increasingly complex environments by learning from one another's diverse practices (Capra, 1997).

Innovative schools create this diversity. Our study included three innovative schools; unfortunately, all three have regressed under the standardization agenda. For instance, the state exams have obliged Durant Alternative School to standardize its teaching and student assessments, turning school-developed history courses that once engaged students of diverse backgrounds into the abstract memory work of World History 1 and 2. Instead of building shared improvement, two principals in these innovative schools have found themselves having to force through implementation. When these once-loved leaders tried to "talk up" the questionable change agendas, many teachers felt that they had sold their schools and their souls to the district or state.

Standardization is the enemy of sustainability. Sustainable leadership recognizes and cultivates many kinds of

excellence in learning, teaching, and leading, and it provides the networks for sharing these different kinds of excellence in cross-fertilizing processes of improvement (Giles & Hargreaves, in press; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Sustainable leadership does not impose standardized templates on everyone.

Sustainable Leadership Is Activist

Standardized reform has exaggerated the problems of the traditional schools in our study, turning these schools into less-motivated versions of their former selves. Meanwhile, the innovative schools have lost some of their edge. Durant has proven the most resilient of all—not just because of its innovativeness or its strength as a learning community, but because of its activist leadership (Oakes, Quartz, & Lipton, 2000). Durant engages assertively with its environment in a pattern of mutual influence.

In the past few years, Durant's courageous new principal has activated his personal and professional networks and forged strategic alliances with the community in a tireless campaign to preserve the school's mission. He has written articles for local and state newspapers, appeared on radio and television programs, and supported students and parents who, in a symbolic gesture, protested in straitjackets outside the district offices. He organized conferences on the adverse effects of high-stakes testing and worked assiduously with his allies throughout the state to push for a request for group variance from the state tests, receiving for his efforts a temporary exclusion from state policy. Durant's story shows that, especially in an unhelpful environment, sustainable leadership must have an activist dimension.

Systems Must Support Sustainable Leadership

Our study found inspiring examples of leaders who did more than just manage change; they pursued and modeled sustainable leadership. Leaders develop

sustainability by committing to and protecting deep learning in their schools; by trying to ensure that improvements last over time, especially after they have gone; by distributing leadership and responsibility to others; by considering the impact of their leadership on the schools and communities around them; by sustaining themselves so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; by promoting and perpetuating diverse approaches to reform rather than standardized prescriptions for teaching and learning; and by engaging actively with their environments.

Most leaders want to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a legacy after they have gone. Leaders don't usually let their schools down; the failure often rests with the systems in which they lead. The results of our study indicate that sustainable leadership cannot be left to individuals, however talented or dedicated they are. If we want change to matter, to spread, and to last, then the systems in which leaders do their work must make sustainability a priority. ■

¹Names of schools and individuals are pseudonyms.

References

- Baker, M., & Foote, M. (in press). Changing spaces: Urban school interrelationships and the impact of standards-based reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*.
- Blackmore, J. (1996). Doing emotional labour in the educational market place. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 17(3), 337-349.
- Byrne, B. M. (1994). Burnout testing for the validity, replication, and invariance of causal structure across the elementary, intermediate, and secondary teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(3), 645-673.
- Capra, F. (1997). *The web of life: A new synthesis of mind and matter*. London: HarperCollins.
- Fink, D., & Brayman, C. (in press). Principals' succession and educational change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Giles, C., & Hargreaves, A. (in press). The sustainability of innovative schools as learning organizations and professional learning communities during standardized reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*.
- Glickman, C. D. (2002). *Leadership for learning: How to help teachers succeed*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Hargreaves, A., & Goodson, I. (2004). *Change over time? A report of educational change over 30 years in eight U.S. and Canadian schools*. Chicago: Spencer Foundation.
- Hargreaves, A., Moore, S., Fink, D., Brayman, C., & White, R. (2003). *Succeeding leaders? A study of principal rotation and succession*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Ontario Principals' Council.
- Louis, K. S., & Kruse, S. D. (1995). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban high schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- MacMillan, R. B. (2000). Leadership succession: Cultures of teaching and educational change. In N. Bascia & A. Hargreaves (Eds.), *The sharp edge of educational change: Teaching, leading, and the realities of reform* (pp. 52-71). New York: Routledge/Falmer.
- McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2001). *Professional communities and the work of high school teaching*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oakes, J., Quartz, K. H., & Lipton, M. (2000). *Becoming good American schools: The struggle for civic virtue in education reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Drummond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 23-28.
- Stoll, L., Fink, D., & Earl, L. (2002). *It's about learning (and it's about time)*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Authors' note: This article is based on the "Change Over Time?" project directed by Andy Hargreaves and funded by the Spencer Foundation. The authors would like to hear from any school districts and other organizations interested in working to develop these principles in their practice.

Copyright © 2004 Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink.

Andy Hargreaves is Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education, Lynch School of Education, Boston College; hargrean@bc.edu. His most recent book is *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity* (Teachers College Press, 2003). **Dean Fink** is an Associate of the International Center for Educational Change at the University of Toronto; dfink@interlynx.net. His most recent book (with Louise Stoll and Lorna Earl) is *It's About Learning (and It's About Time)* (Routledge/Falmer, 2002).



© John Boaz

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.